



## ROCK ART AND THE RITE OF PASSAGE IN SHARENICË

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**ABSTRACT** - Coexistence between two cultural elements, the rock art and the rite of passage, also in the rocks, is a rare phenomenon and quite a distinctive one. This is the case with Sharenicë, a locality in southwest Kosovo, where hundreds of abstract geometric symbols are found engraved on the surface of a rock. The rock has a fissure and a rite of passage is held there once a year. Hundreds of youngsters, children and adults, spend the night of 8 August in a festive ambience beside the Sharenicë rock, waiting for the early morning in order to begin the rite of passage. The motives for this may be various, but based on interviews and field observations, the belief that the rock of Sharenicë is sacred is the main motive for the local population celebrating the rite of passage in this place. In this paper we will try to explain the connection between the engraved symbols of ancient times and the actual ritual practices.

**RIASSUNTO** - La coabitazione di due particolari aspetti culturali, l'arte rupestre e i riti di passaggio, è un fenomeno piuttosto raro. È il caso di Sharenica, dove centinaia di simboli in stile astratto e geometrico si trovano incisi sulla superficie di una roccia che costituisce il più importante sito di arte rupestre del Kosovo. La roccia possiede una fenditura dove si svolge ancora oggi un rito di passaggio. Secondo la tradizione locale, centinaia di abitanti (bambini e adulti) vi passano la notte dell'8 agosto in piena festa, per effettuare nel giorno seguente un rito di passaggio. Le interviste condotte con i partecipanti e le osservazioni dirette risultanti dalla ricerca sul campo suggeriscono che ci sia una credenza riguardo alla sacralità del luogo. Ciò costituisce la ragione principale della presenza di un rito di passaggio in tale sito. Attraverso il mio intervento, cercherò di spiegare come e perché è possibile trovare dei punti in comune tra il senso degli antichi simboli incisi sulla roccia e il significato delle pratiche rituali che si svolgono ancora oggi sullo stesso luogo.

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### INTRODUCTION

In Kosovo there are rocks whose surfaces have been engraved with abstract symbols since the prehistoric period. One of them is Sharenicë, which is located in southwest Kosovo and which is considered to be sacred by the local population, because of the type of rite of passage held there. There are also other rocks in Kosovo where the rite of passage is carried out, but Sharenicë is unique because there are hundreds of engraved symbols on the rock's surface, and it represents the most significant rock art place in Kosovo.

Not only the geography of this region, which is characterized by high mountains on one side and fertile fields on the other, but the presence of these two cultural elements of rock art and rite of passage in this place, prompts the assumption of continuity of residential and cultural development in the region, from prehistory till today. In fact, in the villages of this region there are numerous archeological discoveries that prove the importance of these dwellings from ancient times, especially in the Illyrian-Roman period.

In general, the study of antiquity in Kosovo so far has been more concentrated on the ancient period and less on the prehistoric. Rock art and the rite of passage in stone are two cultural aspects with universal value and very ancient too, important for opening up new research horizons in the field, as well as developing new theoretical perspectives on the development of human culture and civilization. Research in this field may complete our knowledge on the Balkan routes along which it is thought that European culture and civilization have passed.

Exploring rock art began very late in Kosovo. The KRARA association (Kosovo Rock Art Research Association) was established in 2004, and since the discovery of the first site, Sharenicë in Zatriq, at least five other sites have been discovered, in most of which there are symbols in abstract and geometric styles. Sharenicë, among others, is characterized by a rite of passage that is done only once a year, the meaning of which I will try to relate to the meaning of some of the signs engraved on the stone surface.

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## ROCK ART IN SHARENICË

On the surface of the rock of Sharenicë, on two separate plates, nearby each other, a few hundred symbols are engraved. A large part of them is evident, but another large part is covered by moss. Symbols are various, but dots (*cupules*), straight crossed lines (*networks*) and the symbol of trees (*arbolet*) seem to dominate over others. A typology of symbols is presented in Table 1, while in Table 2 a typology of their associations, that is, the connections between symbols, is presented. Both of these tables may be updated after doing additional studies here, especially after the surface is cleaned of moss, in order to facilitate the full visibility of the symbols and their associations.

These symbols have specific meanings and they are messages which have to be interpreted and decoded. Certainly, their meaning is related to lifestyle, the way of thinking, and the beliefs and rituals of the society and era in which they were created. The basic principles of human life, such as survival, protection, relation to the environment, relation to the other (be it the visible or invisible world), symbolic communication, curiosity, challenges, etc, are universal issues of humanity and have been part of life in ancient times also. The needs, experiences, interests, concerns, concepts, ideas, values and beliefs that people of that time have shared, they have engraved in stone, by expressing and articulating them through symbols. Therefore, their decoding and interpretation remains the key to understanding practical and spiritual life in antiquity. Moreover, these symbols can help us understand what Professor Anati calls the history of eras before writing, the History of Prehistory.<sup>1</sup>

Local residents who participate in the rite of passage have no explanation regarding the meaning of the symbols, nor their function. As for the stone and the symbols engraved on it, they have a mysterious attitude towards them. In their narration, they exaggerate, claiming that the signs appear only on one single day, 9 August, and disappear on other days. Of course, this cannot be true, because the signs are engraved in the rock and cannot disappear and reappear. The last time I paid a visit to the place (2012), the leader of the procession said: 'These signs change every year; this year they look this way, but they will look differently next year.'<sup>2</sup> Obviously, this explanation was incorrect, because the signs engraved in the stones cannot change their forms. However, what is changing every year is the expansion of moss on the stone surface, a process which makes certain symbols become gradually covered.

The value of symbols in Sharenicë is exceptional for the cultural heritage in Kosovo. Their character is universal and to a great extent they resemble some symbols found in the Forêt de Fontainebleau (France), but also in Valcamonica (Italy). However, there are symbols in Sharenicë whose shapes seem to be unique. Some of them I will interpret for the purpose of presenting the multiple physical and spiritual connections with the environment. Rock art expresses the spiritual and material world of prehistoric man, but also shows us how to understand culture, history and civilization through symbols. Most signs are associated with each other and represent interesting psychograms. Many others are superimposed, which indicates a long tradition of living and faith in that place. In general, the symbols are not uniformly distributed, but are accumulated in certain areas of the surface of the stone.

Below is a table which shows the main types of symbols and the frequency of their appearance. The typology of symbols and their associations will become even more detailed in the future; however, from the analysis thus far, the following types can be ascertained.

### THE TWO-HEADED FISH

Bicephaly or two-headedness has been a part of mythology in Europe and Asia, as well as in other parts of the world. Not only ancient mythology but also the heraldry of modern nations have two-headed symbols, such as the Albanian crest with the two-headed black eagle. Bicephaly can be found in Roman mythology, in the figure of Janus, the god of gates and passages, which has two faces looking in opposite directions. However, the issue whether the symbol I am naming the two-headed fish is related to the Roman Janus is a hypothetical one. In a way, these two symbols can be compared, because the Sharenicë rock has a passage gate and passing through it is a special experience. But the fish is much older than Janus without any doubt, and in my opinion it has no direct relation with it.

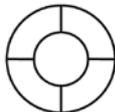
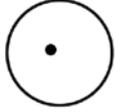
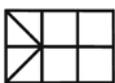
One of the characteristics of parietal art is the presentation of two animals in the form of axial symmetry, often facing each other head to head, or more rarely back to back.<sup>3</sup> The two-headed fish is presented with typical axial symmetry. The front part of the symbol consists of the matching heads with one eye in the middle of each. The dividing line between them continues to the tail, which also appears in a symmetrical manner. Both

1 Emmanuel Anati, *L'odyssée des premiers homes en Europe*, Fayard, Paris

2 An interview with the supervisor of the rite of passing in Sharenicë, conducted on 9 August 2012.

3 Alain Testart (2013) *Avant l'histoire. L'évolution des sociétés de Lascaux à Carnac*, p. 261.

Table 1. Types of symbols and their frequencies

Nr.	Description	Type	Freq.	Nr.	Description	Type	Freq.
1	Lines that connect in a common point to create the image of the sun's rays		a lot	11	Curved and circular lines that represent astral, animal and genital forms		a lot
2	Inclined lines which start in a pivotal line and create the image of trees or vegetation ( <i>arbolet</i> )		a lot	12	Concentric circles cut with lines in the shape of rays that could present a calendar		little
3	Holes ( <i>cupules</i> ) single or grouped		a lot	13	Circles divided into four equal parts by lines crossed in the middle		little
4	Six holes ( <i>cupules</i> ) grouped which appear to form the human body, or the symbol of a circle with a dot in the centre		little	14	Circles with a hole ( <i>cupula</i> ) in the centre		little
5	Two lines in the shape of the letter V, symbolizing the female genital organ ( <i>vulva</i> )		a lot	15	Triangle		a lot
6	Three converging lines that give the image of the vagina;		a lot	16	Squares with the dividing lines in the middle and diagonals that form the sign of the cross and the letter X		little
7	Straight unique lines or parallel ones		a lot	17	Quadrilateral divided in the middle with direct and indirect lines		a lot
8	Parallel and crossed lines that form a network		a lot	18	Trapezoid with two rays that form the letter X		little
9	Two lines crossed in the shape of the letter X		a lot	19	Two lines that form the letter L		a lot
10	Two straight lines in the form of a cross		a lot	20	Two lines that form the letter T		a lot

heads look full and healthy and are defined by a deep line of the body, left with only vertebrae, bones and tail. Therefore, besides the symmetry, the two-headed-fish also has an ambivalent view, because the lines used to represent the symbol are not equal: the lines used to draw the heads are much deeper and more marked than the lines used for the remainder of the body (Fig.1).

The dividing line between the two heads, which continues down the body as vertebra, is straight and emphasized. On the back side of the symbol, on both sides of the vertebral line, bones are distributed symmetrically, projecting the figure of the fish as an arrow pointing in one direction. As a whole, the figure presents two completely ambivalent views: life, health, well-being, harmony and happiness are reflected in the symmetrical heads at the front; the body behind reflects death, destruction, hunger and misery. The front part of the figure, with healthy heads facing each other with their eyes open, gives the impression of vigilance, optimism and direction; the back side seems to show the depletion of life resources and lack of food. The depletion of food resources, which could have been caused due to climate or geographical conditions, perhaps has provoked migration movements, which have been part of the life of human clans throughout prehistory.

**Table2.** Associations of symbols and their frequency

Nr	Description	Type of association	Exemple	Freq.
1	Sun ( <i>astr</i> ) associated with tree ( <i>arbolet</i> ) and parallel lines, which represent the link into the ecosystem			a lot
2	Net that can symbolize the property of the territory, associated with the symbol of energy ( <i>cupules</i> ) and movement(X)			a lot
3	Bicephalous fish, whose only remains are backbone and tail			litle/ unique
4	An astronomical calendar or an image associated with straight and curved lines. A hunting scene seems to appear superimposed			litle
5	The figure of a quadrilateral divided into squares, associated with dots, sun and cross			a lot
6	The roof of the house or a tent associated with dots ( <i>cupules</i> ) and a circle with a cross in the middle			a lot
7	A straight line, deep and extending into the middle, which resembles the vagina, associated with the sun ( <i>astr</i> ) and four dots ( <i>cupules</i> ). This motif may represent a fertility spell			a lot
8	The circle with a dot in the middle, quadrilateral divided by direct and indirect lines and a figure with curved lines, associated with the sun, resemble a small baby wrapped by the snake			litle/ unique
9	Trees ( <i>arbolet</i> ) associated with the sun ( <i>astr</i> ), inserted into a frame			litle
10	Many dots ( <i>cupules</i> ) associated with straight and curved lines, where the image of the male genital organ in a disguised shape appears with a circle that has a cross in the middle			a lot

Interpretations of prehistoric symbols are very delicate, because we have to keep in mind the complexity of human life. According to Professor Anati,<sup>4</sup> food, sex and territory have been the primary concerns of human communities since prehistoric times. All three of these motives implicate the transition from one state to another, in three aspects: physical, spiritual and social. I think that the two-headed fish is a very complex figure that symbolizes a multiple physical, spiritual and social transition. Certainly, one can derive other interpretations, but in my opinion this is a typical symbol that clearly represents the mutual and multiple connections between a human being and its lifeworld, as well as the relation between culture and nature.

4 Emmanuel Anati, 2002 : *La Struttura Elementare dell'Arte*, Edizioni del Centro (Capo di Ponte), p. 29.

## ‘THE SUN WITH THE TREE’, AN IMAGE OF THE ECOSYSTEM

The figure of the sun with the tree is engraved clearly on the rock of Sharenicë; it is very distinctive as an image and has a rather complex meaning. We find the symbol of the sun (*astra*) repeated several times in Sharenicë, as well as the symbol of the tree (*arbol*). Yet, in almost all other cases, these two symbols are separated from each other. They are usually associated with other symbols, such as the *vulva*, the straight line, the square, the X and dots, and together they create very interesting ideograms. Also, in none of the other cases found in this area are these two symbols as clear and impressive as in the ideogram in the photo below.

This composition at first glance gives the impression of a landscape, but with deeper reflection we see that the association of these two symbols is more than just a landscape, and reflects a season, or the calendar period, and ecological developments related to it. Therefore, the figure reflects the ecological process in nature and its connection to time cycles. Two diagonal lines spread across the timber and joined at the sunrays connect the two symbols. This symbolic connection of the two symbols reflects the symbolic connection and interdependence between the vegetal world and the astral one.

The knowledge of a complex relationship of the ecosystem, i.e., the earthly world and the celestial one, is reflected clearly in the composition of the sun with the tree, which seems to have dynamics and optimism in itself, because it expresses the rejuvenation of nature. The sun has 12 rays spreading in all directions, emanating from an emphasized centre, and it looks very powerful; the tree has many branches and appears also to be in the stage of blooming, growth or vegetal explosion.

Interpretations of the figure can be different, but in addition to the season of nature’s rejuvenation, this engraving reminds us of the historical era in which it was created. Based on the appearance and the meaning of the figure, it is very possible that it was created during the Neolithic period, during the agrarian revolution period. The direct appearance of the connection between the vegetal world and the sun can be a representation of the agricultural knowledge of a prehistoric clan about the new practices of ensuring survival. The two diagonal lines that start on the right side of the tree and end at the sunrays represent the activity factor over the ecosystem: human labour or work tools. Both lines begin from a circle which resembles a wheel, and this entire part of the composition resembles a farm tool or working technology, which is an important part of the clan’s economy (Fig. 2).

If ‘The sun with the tree’ composition symbolizes the rejuvenation of nature, the resumption of new life, and consequently survival, wellbeing, fertility and reproduction, then we can say that even today in that region the concept of restarting of the new period is present, which is very important for the life of the community and their traditional economy, that is, viticulture. Even nowadays the idea of resumption is present, because according to the local traditions and residents’ old beliefs, on 9 August grapes start to change colour and mature. Therefore, the restart, same as the other universal principles: reproduction, survival, dependency, communication, etc, is part of the messages of prehistoric symbols. This idea is present even today in both spiritual life and in the other practices of whole humanity.

## THE RITE OF PASSAGE IN SHARENICË

On the night between 8 and 9 August, several hundred people, mostly youngsters from the Anadrin region (southwestern Kosovo), leave for the Sharenicë rock to celebrate their feast, also called Sharenicë.<sup>5</sup> The gathering starts immediately after midnight and lasts until the next morning. People celebrate by lighting fires, playing, singing and dancing. Usually, the first to arrive at the location is a dervish who by praying and lighting candles ‘purifies’ the place of the procession.

The rite of passage starts with the first sunrise. At the bottom of the Sharenicë rock, people begin to enter one by one through an opening and exit on the upper side. Since the passage hole is narrow (0.70 m) and long (about 10 m), people enter in a single queue and help each other by gently pushing forward. It is a special experience for the observer to watch the rock full of people and to hear voices of children, parents and spouses talking to each other, shouting and guiding each other to move forward. Of course, this scenery is even more impressive for the participants who perform the rite. During this procession they are accompanied by the feeling that something bad in their life is about to end and something good is starting.

According to traditional beliefs, the hole that is used for the passage expands for the righteous people, while it narrows for sinners. The belief that the passage expands and contracts, depending on the human character, shows the extent of the feeling of sacrality that locals have for the Sharenicë stone.

The rite of passage in Sharenicë is usually performed by young people and married women, and occasionally by the elderly. Each of them may have a different motive, but the common belief is that Sharenicë is a sanctuary

5 Sharenicë is the name which is used for both the festival day and the place of the ritual.



and passing through it brings luck. People with health issues, such as speaking difficulties, walking difficulties, mental problems, enter the passage for therapeutic effects. Women who have fertility problems perform the rite, hoping that it will help them get pregnant, while those who are already pregnant hope for a successful pregnancy. Single men and women walk the passage hoping that it will help them find their life partners.

After performing the rite of passage, those who do it for therapeutic purposes walk to the dervish who sits nearby and blows at them. Afterwards, people offer gifts (*Nezër*), which usually do not have high material value, but have the character of a symbolic exchange with the divine. Residents believe that this place should only be visited on this day. Visiting it on other days could cause disasters<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 3).

The rite of passage is a widespread phenomenon in all societies and historical eras. It manifests itself in different ways, depending on the cultural and spiritual traditions created by human groups, societies or civilizations. The rite of passage is a unique experience that is created during the passage from one state to another; from one social status to another; from one phase of life to another. In the popular tradition of several localities in Kosovo, huge rocks divided into two parts become part of this experience.<sup>7</sup>

The stone represents strength, rigidity and sustainability, and penetration through it is experienced as something special. Entering inside the stone, touching and rubbing with the body, experiencing coldness, the hardness, the weight and its greatness, then the feeling of experiencing the moment of transition to a new phase, the prayer for specific wishes, all these create a special experience. Using natural stone fissures to carry the personal body from one side to another has a symbolic meaning of penetration, identification with the world and the spirits, and with nature and its forces.<sup>8</sup>

What are the relations between the prehistoric symbols in Sharenicë and the actual rite performed there? A considerable part of the prehistoric symbols undoubtedly presents basic human motives, those associated with continuity of the species, such as sexuality, fertility, reproduction. What happens today at the stone of Sharenicë has to do precisely with these motives. Women who have fertility problems perform the rite of passage in Sharenicë, wishing to resolve their problems. The belief that passing through a perforated stones, dolmens, or menhirs, will solve fertility problems is part of popular rituals in other European countries too.

Some symbols have a magical character, and the use of magic to ensure luck and prosperity in life is a common practice also. Unmarried young people make the rite of passage hoping that they will have luck in finding a partner and starting a new phase in life. Some issues such as mysticism, secrecy, sacrifice and disguise are part of the messages of the engraved ancient symbols. Cult, sacrality, sacrifice, mysticism and secrecy are also part of the beliefs and rituals held today in Sharenicë. Not only the ritual as such, but also the time and place where it is performed add to its mystery. Distance from the residence, mountain height, rocky terrain, then the period after midnight, sunrise, early morning; all these are elements that remind us of what Gennep calls separation, margin and aggregation, which present the highlights of the rites of passage.<sup>9</sup> In some engraved symbols it is possible to read messages and transitional situations, with sharing, grouping, rebirth, etc.

We can conclude that Sharenicë is a place which connects eras of history and prehistory; connecting the world of art with faith; the profane with the sacred. Rock art and the rock in the human soul and the imagination; the rock as natural object and at the same time as the social 'institution' (sanctuary); the rock as a reference of a place and at the same time as the archive of memory, or a medium of communication –this is the case of Sharenicë.

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6 I think that this taboo has had a positive function in preserving prehistoric symbols, which have an extraordinary value not only for the cultural heritage in Kosovo, but for the study of the human prehistory in general.

7 Apart from Sharenicë, the rite of passage is performed in Nashec, Shalë and Krilevë, and earlier it was performed in Bresalc too. In all these places the rite of passage is performed by passing through a natural hole found on rocks divided into two parts, or through their natural passages.

8 Shemsi Krasniqi, *Croyances et pratiques rituelles albanaise du Kosovo. Réflexions sur une écoculture*, p. 138.

9 Arnold van Gennep (2004) *Les rites de passage*, p. 14.



Fig. 1. The two-headed fish

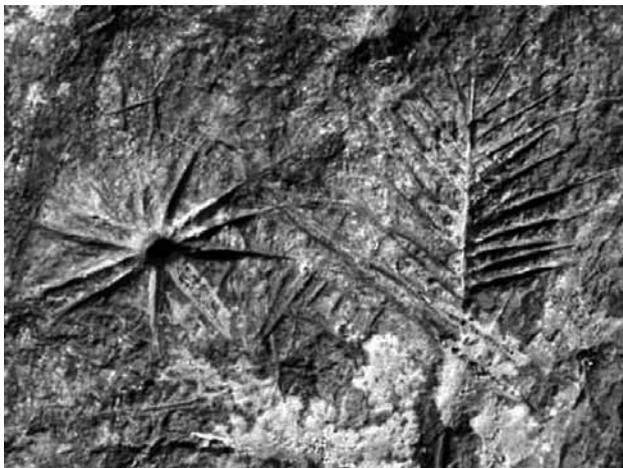
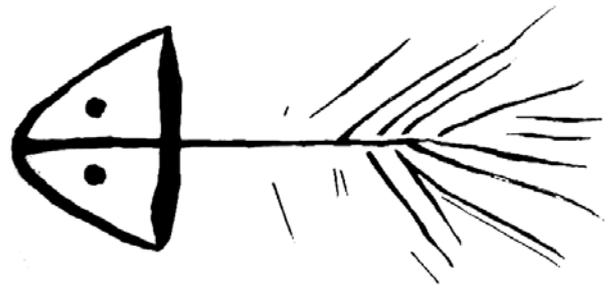


Fig. 2. The sun with the tree, an image of an ecosystem



Figs 3 and 4. The Rite of Passage in Sharenice, 9 August 2009

